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SUBJECT: BELARUS POPULATION IN SIGNIFICANT DECLINE

REF: A. 06 MINSK 152

[1](#)B. MINSK 219

#### Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) According to Belarusian and U.N. statistics the population of Belarus continues to decline at a rate of roughly 0.4 percent annually. If this trend continues, Belarus' population will be reduced by a third, to 6.6 million, by 2050. The low birthrate, 1.21 percent in 2006, remains the single largest contributing factor to this trend. Additionally, the inefficient healthcare system has failed to bring mortality in line with levels normal for developed countries. On March 26, the GOB issued its "Demographic Security Program", which calls for the government to spend roughly USD 313 million between 2007 and 2010 on programs that aim to decrease mortality and increase fertility. Some UN experts doubt that the population decline can be reversed, and believe too that intensified GOB efforts can only delay the inevitable. End summary.

#### Population Could Drop by One-Third

[1](#)2. (SBU) A general indicator of society's health is the Probable Life Expectancy at Birth (PLEB). During the 1990s, the PLEB in Belarus decreased for women by 2.1 years and for men by nearly 6 years. In comparison to developed countries, this indicator remains 5-6 years lower for women and 12-14 years lower for men. Coinciding with a period of severe economic instability, Belarus' population peaked in 1993 at 10.24 million. From 1990 to 2006 the population declined at a rate of approximately 0.4 percent annually. If this trend continues at the current rate, by 2050 Belarus will have roughly 6.6 million citizens, or one-third fewer citizens than it has currently.

#### Factors Behind the Trend

#### Relatively High Mortality

[1](#)3. (SBU) From 1991 to 2005 the mortality rate grew 18.7 percent for women and 41 percent for men. According to Natalya Galkevich, a chief pediatrician in the Ministry of Health, the child mortality rate in rural areas remains double that in cities. In 2005, Belarus averaged 12 child deaths per 1000 children under age five, versus 7 in the U.S. Children under age five account for 60 percent of all deaths

among Belarus' children. Accidents, poisonings, congenital disorders and prenatal conditions cause 70 percent of all deaths among children under 15. The maternal mortality rate in Belarus peaked in 2000 at 24.2 per 100,000 live births (ref A). In 2005 the rate was down to 15.5. Cardiovascular disease, intoxication, and traumas have become the most common causes of death among working-age Belarusians. Injuries cause 163 deaths per 100,000 per year in Belarus, versus 45 in the EU. In 2006 over 15,000 people died from accident-related trauma, making this the third highest cause of death. Alcohol-related mortality grows yearly, having nearly doubled since 1990, and in the last decade drug use has tripled.

#### Underutilization of Resources

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14. (SBU) The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Program Coordinator for Belarus, Tatyana Naplichnik, expressed to Poloff that Belarus spends sufficient funds on health care (roughly 4 percent of GDP). However, the healthcare system has not been updated since Soviet times and significant waste and misallocation continue. For example, Belarus lacks sufficient outpatient services. This forces nearly everyone to use hospitals, even for the slightest procedure, thereby increasing costs. Furthermore, the average hospital stay in Belarus remains 11.5 days, versus four days in the U.S. Belarus also continues to maintain double the European average of hospital beds. Despite the Gomel region's claim that it lacks 600 doctors, Naplichnik noted that Belarus' doctor to patient ratio currently remains one of the world's highest at 1:250, versus 1:341 in the U.S. Naplichnik added that nurses are not used to their full potential. Currently, they fill out paperwork, take patients' temperature, and do little else.

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#### Poor Medical Care: Over-Age Doctors, Out-of-Date Equipment

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15. (SBU) The Belarusian Union of Healthcare Workers has voiced concern over the low wages, roughly USD 171 per month, which general practitioners at district clinics earn. The Union was also alarmed over the high proportion of doctors who continue working after reaching retirement age. Such doctors account for 16-18 percent of the medical staff in the provinces and 45 percent at some clinics in Minsk. Furthermore, only one in four medical school graduates assigned to jobs in rural areas was provided housing last year (ref B). The Union fears that low wages and poor benefits may affect doctor's motivation and skill level. According to the health ministry, a total of USD 119 million worth of equipment was purchased last year. Despite this, reportedly 80 percent of hospital equipment has been in service for at least ten years. Modern equipment is often unavailable or simply non-existent.

#### ----- GOB Plans to Address the Problem -----

#### "2007-2010 Program of Demographic Security"

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16. (SBU) The GOB plans to allocate USD 313 million for its demographic security program. The program aims to boost the birthrate, strengthen the family, promote healthy lifestyles, improve health services, increase life expectancy, and "optimize" migration. However, Naplichnik commented that the GOB has set unrealistic goals. The UNFPA estimates that the Belarusian birthrate, currently at 1.2 percent, will never again reach the replacement level of 2.1 percent. However, a rate of 1.5 percent would be sufficient, in combination with a decreased mortality rate resulting from improved health

services, to significantly slow the rate of population decline. Therefore, the UNFPA recommends that the GOB concentrate efforts on demographic statistics it can more easily influence, such as reducing the number of deaths related to accidents, intoxication and cardiovascular disease.

#### Increasing the Birthrate and Creating Affordable Housing

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¶17. (SBU) The fertility rate in Belarus, as a result of WWII, the war in Afghanistan, and Soviet fertility programs, remains in a state of flux. Approximately every 20 years the fertility rate increases significantly for a few years as another generation of women reaches childbearing age. The temporary effect of this cycle has manifested itself in Belarus in the form of an increased birth rate the last few years, up 6.5 percent in 2006. Thus, the UN, acting as a GOB implementing agency, plans to target its funds on families with three or more children. By targeting families, and not each child, the UN assistance could help increase the fertility rate and decrease the rate of flux.

¶18. (SBU) According to the UNFPA, which continues to work closely with the GOB on this issue, the GOB plans to make housing more affordable for larger families. They also plan to offer to pay half of low interest (five-percent) forty-year mortgages to families with three or more children. A presidential edict on April 3 increased the income tax exemption for families with three or more children under 18. However, in reality this means that a family of five may only earn approximately USD 200 per month before it must begin paying income taxes.

#### Comment

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¶19. (SBU) While the majority of official pronouncements and state media press releases continue to paint a picture of economic stability and a largely satisfied society, the sobering demographic statistics indicate that this may be more of a dream than reality. Despite all of Lukashenko's efforts to maintain a welfare state and reassure and reconcile societal fears about the future, the fertility rate remains well below replacement level, which may indicate that under the surface society remains uncertain about the future.

¶10. (SBU) It seems that the current regime remains intent

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upon using a well-worn bureaucratic method to solve this problem, i.e. throw enough money and people at it and it will get better. Unfortunately for Belarus, the decreasing size of both the population and the state budget no longer make this solution viable. For Belarus to have any hope of slowing its demographic decline, let alone reversing it, the authorities will have to utilize the resources currently available more efficiently. In addition, we understand that the oppressive political situation also limits Belarusians' interest in raising families, an obstacle the regime is incapable of addressing.

Moore